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Back to Bhutan, 2017-2018

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Back to Bhutan, 2017–2018

Philippe Della Casa

After a technical pause, the Phobjikha Project within the Bhutanese-Swiss cooperation in archaeology could be resumed in the fall of 2017. Under the lead of Christian Bader (SLSA) and Karma Tenzin (DCHS), a team of students and cultural officers engaged in a four-week survey campaign with the aim of localizing and documenting archaeological features throughout the valley. These are for the major part (burial) mounds, of which several had already been identified during the preliminary visits in 2012–14.

In 2018, two subsequent field campaigns were used for the geophysical survey of a number of mounds, and a test excavation in one of the investigated features. Burkart Ullrich from Eastern Atlas (Berlin) brought along the necessary equipment (a ground penetrating radar

and probes for geoelectric tomography), the team consisted again of Bhutanese and Swiss scientists, among which two master students of the UZH. Since the results were very promising, the Bhutanese authorities decided that one of the mounds (M31) should be further analyzed by excavation, which happened in the fall of 2018.

During the terrain works, several stone structures corresponding to features visible on the radar image could be evidenced. Most prominent of these are two slab-covered stone tunnels that intersect in the middle of the mound, where a small deposit of glass beads was discovered. A first ^{14}C date points to the 5th / 6th century AD – a period considered as Pre-Buddhist in Bhutan, and of which very little is known to this day. Whether the mound originally served as a burial monument could not yet be ascertained.



1 Survey with ground penetrating radar on mound M31 in the Phobjikha valley, Bhutan, c. 3000 m asl (University of Zurich).



2 Georeferenced positioning on a mound in order to elaborate a digital terrain model/DTM (University of Zurich).



3 Stone structures identified during excavation works on mound M31 (DCHS Bhutan).

The two UZH students are currently working on their master's theses on the methods and results of the M31 excavation and on an archaeological map of the Phobjikha valley respectively. Further field campaigns are expected in 2019–20.

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